Communications and Strategy Development

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world increasingly composed of interwoven complex adaptive systems that frees hundreds of millions from the depths of poverty but also generates massive problems that are difficult to comprehend or to resolve. To address those problems, we need well thought out strategies. And to support the effective execution of those strategies, we need good strategic communications plans. Or so it might seem.

> "Are governments drawn to strategic communications merely in order to communicate national security strategy, or is there more at stake? Do strategic communications have more to offer than has so far been supposed?"[i]

Answering "Yes" to the latter question, this article offers a more extensive view of the role of strategic communication, or more simply, communication[ii], in the formulation, execution and exploitation of strategy. Part of that expanded view of communication is that, in addition using specialized media experts, strategists need to actively consider communication (meaning the exchange of information) as a primary component of all they do. Communication, to paraphrase what as has been said of other activities, is "too important to be left to the communicators."

Strategy and communication are an integral whole best practiced as art not science. The strategist, as artist, uses principles not checklists, intuition more than rules, to collaboratively shape a better future in a world composed of interconnected complex adaptive systems

Complex Adaptive Systems

Problems don't just happen. They are the products of interactions among a variety of actors in what are described as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). Complex adaptive systems have several characteristics[iii] which profoundly influence both strategy development and, by extension, the communication effort.

- <u>Large numbers of independent elements</u> often called "agents". Each agent takes action (including communicating) for its own purposes without necessarily consulting others. This is referred to as "Multi-mindedness" and implies a high degree of decentralized control with limited authority. Rather than a dialog (or even worse, the typical monolog) between "communicator" and "audience", multi-mindedness and the connectivity discussed below means there are many conversations occurring at once, all the time, with significant implications for strategy development and execution.

- <u>High levels of connectivity and interdependence</u> among the various agents. The more an agent is connected with others, the more power and/or influence it has. At the same time, maintaining those connections often entails increased interdependence which reduces freedom of action (think of the limitations imposed on national sovereignty through alliances and multinational treaties). Media agents should be seen as in, rather than as external to, the CAS; they act on and are acted upon by the other agents in the system.

- <u>Diffuse arbitrary boundaries</u>. Conceptually, everything is connected to everything; everything influences everything. The universe ("all that is") is one massive complex system composed of innumerable, interconnected complex systems. Interesting mental game but not very helpful when we are faced with a specific problem in a specific circumstance. Each agent in a CAS will have its own conception of what is and is not part of the system. Multi-minded communications enable a strategist to set at least tentative system boundaries to the specific problem they face as will be explored below.

- <u>Dynamic emergence</u>. Many agents, all acting in their self-perceived interests over time, create highly dynamic systems; CAS are always changing. What researchers have discovered is that, despite having no or limited central control or authority, CAS often self-generate processes to improve the functioning and sustainment of the system; this is known as self-organization or emergence. See Figure 1 for a graphic portrayal of how order can emerge over time from a seemingly unrelated set of interactions.
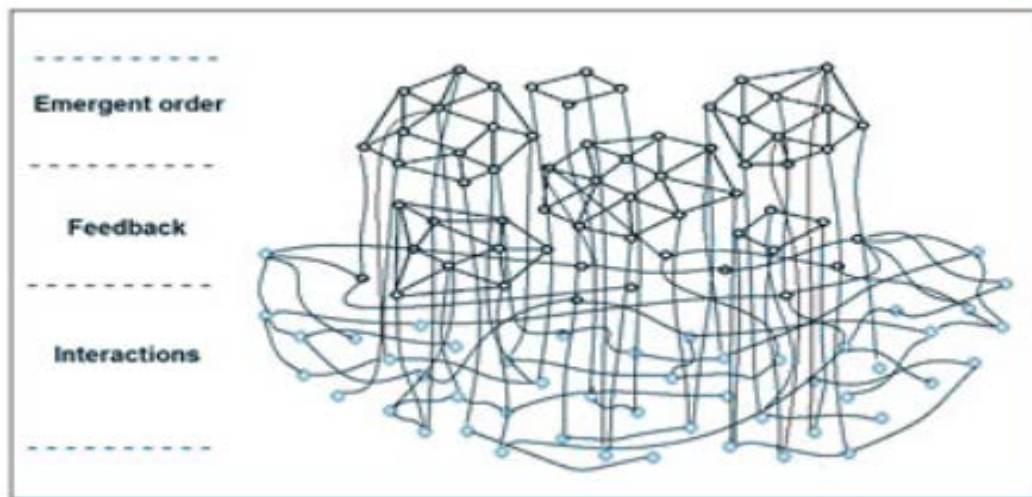

Figure 1 Emergence   http://www.maverickandboutique.com/complex-adaptive-systems/

An example of this is the security structure of international relations. Over time, the collection (ever changing) of sovereign nations on Earth have generated a wide array of organizations and processes to improve individual and overall prosperity and to limit the negative consequences of conflicting interests. Various agents have exercised leadership over parts of the emergence of the international system; however, no single nation has been "in charge". Consider the examples of the creation of the UN system, the growth of the Global Climate Change initiative and continuing co-evolution of cyber-space governance.

Dynamic emergence within a CAS is, in part, a result of the rapid learning across the system enabled by the connected and interdependent communication environment discussed earlier.[iv]

- <u>Non-predictability</u>. Combining the above characteristics leads to the creation of feedback loops within a CAS—what one agent ("A") does impacts other agents' actions and what they do impacts what "A" then does. The classic example of this in international security is the so-called "security dilemma" in which two or more nations become entangled in an arms race based on real or imaged changes in the military capabilities of the others. In the real world such feedback loops (cycles of action/reaction) often involve multiple agents, and significant time delays in observing the effects of actions making it very difficult to clearly follow cause and effect. Without clear chains of cause and effect, without detailed knowledge of the exact condition of the CAS at a specific point in time and without a better understanding of how humans balance emotion and rationality in decision making, predicting the precise future of a CAS is much like predicting the weather: somewhat accurate over the short term and long term but highly inexact mid-term.

It is in that context of dynamic uncertainty among multiple players that strategy is practiced.

STRATEGY PROCESS

While a complete explanation of the process of strategy development is beyond the scope of this article, a first step in understanding the linkages between communication and strategy is a grasp of the essence of strategy development and execution. Traditionally, strategists have applied a linear process of assessing the situation, identifying "root causes" to be remedied, determining goals to be achieved, identifying ways to achieve those goals and allocating the resources (including communications) needed to support the strategy.

Increasingly, strategists and policy makers appreciate that many of the problems they face are less linear and more like the CAS described above. They have begun to shift towards thinking about strategy as less of a semi-rigid, knowable path towards an "end state" and more as an evolving set of guidance for actions aimed at favorably influencing the behavior of the complex adaptive systems they face.[v]

> *Strategy is not problem solving.*
>
> *Strategy is the creation and maintenance of advantage.*

That is not to say that traditional, linear thinking is not appropriate in any situation. Even within CAS, there are often sub-systems that are in fact linear—knowable cause and effect—and in those cases it is vital to use the more direct, predictable method of thinking.

The multi-minded, dynamic, emergent and unpredictable nature of CAS problems implies the need for a multi-minded, dynamic, emergent and flexible strategy development process. Rather than a sequential process of "Observe, Orient, Decide, Act,"[vi] strategy development should be reformulated as a process entailing three nearly simultaneous lines of thinking:

1. Formulation and socialization
2. Execution and modification; and
3. Strategy exploitation

None of these lines of thinking will be successful without the others and each requires significant communication efforts within four main purposes of communication: to inquire, to inform, to persuade, and to develop goodwill.[vii] As was stated in the introduction, communication is a prime responsibility of the strategist, not just that of the communication specialist.

COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGY FORMULATION AND SOCIALIZATION

The entire enterprise of strategy formulation begins with communication. Someone receives information (a communication) that there is a problem; that the CAS they are concerned with is not producing some desired result. In traditional strategy thinking, it is felt that by identifying a linear cause-effect chain, the problem can be solved. For CAS strategy, it is the system (multiple interactions among multiple agents, producing multiple results) that is the focus for strategy.

This leads directly to an inquiry (communication) process, an "assessment", during which information is intentionally or unintentionally exchanged about the nature of the system, who's involved, what is the desired result, what are the options available, etc. Because there are no predefined boundaries on a CAS (everything is connected to everything), deciding where to focus is critical to formulating a strategy. This involves two distinct processes: understanding the structure of the system (who are the agents and what their interactions are) and deciding what perspective is most appropriate to the situation.

Building an understanding of the structure of the system has often been left to strategic planners or intelligence analysts who tend to work in isolation looking at the system as something "out there" to be uncovered. What is often missed is the fact that the mere act of conducting an assessment has an impact on the functioning of the system. For example, as ISIS[1] suddenly emerged as a strategic concern in the Middle East recently, efforts by the United States government to understand the situation was used by some as an excuse for inactivity; by others as a lever to undermine US credibility; by others to seek domestic political advantage.

Given the nature of CAS, a better approach would be to approach the assessment as a process *of looking within* the system rather than *looking at* it. Looking within the system acknowledges the interactive role of the other agents in the system and encourages conversations with them as well as about them. It involves strategic listening as well as strategic talking.

The art of the assessment, in part, is deciding who to talk/listen to and who to ignore. The end produce of assessing the structure of the system includes all the agents and interactions that have a significant direct or indirect impact on the system. Two potential flaws that can occur are 1) to be so inclusive that there are too many factors to be considered resulting in decision paralysis or 2) to be so narrow as to assume that a CAS can be distilled to a two agent "system" resulting in the probability of surprise when a supposedly unimportant agent spoils the party.

The role of the media, increasingly including non-traditional media, in informing the public and giving voice to marginalized groups helps clarify who are to be considered important agents and important interactions within the system under assessment.

The second process within the assessment is choosing a perspective on the nature of the system; a process also referred to as "framing". Every CAS has multiple perspectives, or frames, that could be used to understand that system. For example, the "North Korean Problem" can be viewed as a nuclear proliferation issue, or a human rights issue, an economic or political development issue, a divided nation issue, a cyber-security issue and so on.

There is no "correct" perspective on this or any other CAS; the art of the assessment is choosing a frame is accounting for the interests of the key agents in the system and not distorting the realities of the dynamics within the system. It would probably not be useful, for example, to frame the North Korean Problem as primarily a Korean revanchist issue (even if some individual Koreans have expressed interest in ancient Koguryo dynasty lands now in China).

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[1] Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

The importance of framing for strategy and communication involves three considerations. First, the choice of the preferred frame is often contingent on who is doing the assessment: an economist will most often choose an economic frame; a military officer, a military frame, etc. Second, a dominant frame among the majority of the key agents often emerges as a result of the multiple communications on-going within the system. The public discourse in the media and private communications among national leaders are critical in the generation of that dominant frame. Third, the way an issue is framed shapes what are considered viable solutions. If North Korea is an economic development problem, economic sanctions would seem to be counter-productive; if it is seen as a nuclear proliferation issue, economic sanctions might be seen as useful.

The implications of those three aspects of framing include that success of a strategy is contingent on the collective views and interests of the agents within the system. A strategist, attempting to formulate a strategy, will need to get involved in, and attempt to shape, the communication context surrounding the issue being addressed. Also, there is a tension between restricting who knows the thrust of a developing strategy and the need to communicate broadly, even with those who may oppose that strategy.[viii] Finally, the options for action within a strategy will be subject to that collective communication context. That is not to say that a strategist may not feel compelled to propose a "go it alone" approach to a strategic problem; only to suggest that such an approach is highly risky within a complex adaptive system. As U.S. Marine Corps General James Mathis put it: "The enemy gets a vote".

For CAS-related strategies, there will likely be a significant number of options that could be acted upon. The final part of the strategy formulation and socialization process is communicating a "strategic direction" for the strategy: what approaches will be pursued to shift interactions among which agents to change the system towards more desirable outcomes and the relative priorities among those approaches. Art, not science; the choice of strategic direction must be considered contingent and immediately subject to feedback from the system.

Socialization of an emerging strategy is essentially a communication activity related to persuasion and good-will creation. Strategies must not only be created, they must also be sold to those who are affected.[ix] Recognizing the dynamic, interdependent nature of the system and issue being addressed, socialization of strategy begins the moment the strategist begins the assessment process. Potential supporters and opponents must be contacted (even if indirectly) to gauge the possible limits within which the strategy must operate. Good strategists make it easy for media and other professional communicators to convey the essence of the strategy by writing good 'sound bites[2]' into the text of the strategy. Even selecting who will socialize the strategy with who is a necessary part of strategy formulation.

> **Socialization Questions About the Strategy:**
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> - Does it have a meaningful purpose?
> - Does it have clear, bold policy choices?
> - Does it generate an emotional connection?
> - Is it consistent with its proponents' behavior?
> - Can it be understood as a story?
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> *(Adapted from Shawn Callahan, "Will Your Strategy Stick?" http://www.anecdote.com/2012/10/will-your-strategy-stick/)*

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[2] 'Sound bites' are the phrases that media use to convert a 15 minute interview into a 10 second cut or a single headline. For strategists, sound bites can be thought of as the highly condensed message they wish to convey.

COMMUNICATION AS PART OF STRATEGY EXECUTION AND MODIFICATION

The messy, contingent, and emergent process of strategy formulation and socialization does not end once a strategy is chosen for implementation. The idea that strategy execution leads to success or failure in achieving some predetermined end-state is old-think. Strategy execution, particularly within a CAS environment, is the progressive and continual modification of priorities and approaches aimed at creating and maintaining a strategic advantage within the system. Strategy execution requires a continual communication effort to inquire, inform, persuade and generate good will.

Strategy is about purposeful action. The action(s) that flow from strategy execution are, and need to be understood as, one form of communication. There is an old saying: "What you are doing speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you are saying." The question for the strategist is: What are my actions saying? Each action sends three messages: the message intended by the actor, the message heard by the target of the action, and the message(s) heard by the many observers. The art of the strategist is to have all three of those messages support the strategic direction of her strategy.

As a strategy is being executed, there is also a need to gather and exchange across the system, a clear understanding of how well the strategy is or is not shifting the system in favorable ways. Because CAS have the attribute of feedback-induced unpredictability, it is particularly important to monitor system interactions so that any unfavorable trends can be mitigated and favorable trends can be reinforced quickly. This is much more than just identifying predetermined "measures of effectiveness" or time line milestones to be achieved. It requires an in-depth understanding of how the system is working and acute awareness of small, perhaps slow-moving, changes that may lead to large, unexpected second or third order effects. The strategist creates, as an integral part of the strategy, a communication process that will provide the needed clues to such system movements. That process will also alert the strategist of ways to exploit success of the strategy or mitigate against any shortfalls—what next?

COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGY EXPLOITATION

Strategy exploitation is a new concept. Traditionally, strategy ended with the achievement of a predetermined desired end state. The next phase was simply the identification of a new problem to be solved; often seen as unrelated to the previous strategy. CAS-focused strategy assumes an almost endless evolution of the system and the issues it creates. Dealing with the fallout from a previously pursued strategy is part of that process; a part that may be called strategy exploitation.

Within a CAS environment, as a strategy begins to bear fruit, whether slowly or rapidly, the strategist is presented with both challenge and opportunity. There will be unexpected outcomes and varying degrees of success or failure. The lingering effects of the current strategy will form a major part of the environment in which the strategist operate.

That plus the influence of self-organization or emergence as a CAS attribute means that strategic problems and the CAS that generate them tend to evolve as opposed to disappearing. The NATO security CAS problem vis-a-vis the Soviet Union has reappeared as a very similar problem of how to deal with Russia today. The "Iran Problem" of today can be traced easily back to the "Shah Problem" of the 1960's.

Creating a new strategy to maintain the advantages offered by the successful current strategy while learning and adopting from any strategic mistakes or unforeseen impacts will necessitate a reinvigorating of the strategy formulation line of thinking discussed earlier even as the current strategy proceeds.

CONCLUSION

Strategy has traditionally been seen as an approach to rational problem solving. Communication was seen as supporting strategy in an almost binary fashion—bringing information to the strategist and sending information from the strategist. Increasingly, strategy is viewed as attempting to gain continuing advantage in the context of a complex adaptive system. Since such systems are composed of multiple, independent and interdependent agents, the intent of communication is also shifting towards a more comprehensive and multi-party construct—lots of conversations going in multiple directions. Furthermore, constructing a strategy within a dynamic, emergent system requires that communication be seen as an integral part of the strategy and not an ancillary support activity.

A strategist can draw certain principles that will support a successful strategy from considering how strategy is formulated, socialized, executed, modified and exploited.

Communication Principles for Strategists:

- Craft your strategy so it is easy to sell; you will have to sell it
- Talk to anyone and everyone who might be important to success of the strategy
- Ask lots of questions and listen to the answers
- Communication includes facts, rumors, myths and lies; choose wisely
- If you don't provide the "sound bites" about your strategy, someone else will
- Strategy, like communication, is an art. Practice it creatively within a holistic environment

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

[i] Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French and Claire Yorke, "Strategic Communications and National Strategy", *Chatham House Report*, September 2011, v http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/178465

[ii] Terms such as "Strategic Communication" or "Influence Communication" often raise sterile debates over definitions and boundaries that the use of the simple, encompassing word "communication" avoids. This article uses the Oxford dictionary definition of communication as "The imparting or exchanging of information or news" http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/communication .

[iii] There is no generally accepted description of complex adaptive system characteristics but most authors in the field include some variation of those included in this article.

[iv] Two interesting books have been written about this widespread and rapid spread of learning. *"Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age"* by Clay Shirky, (New York, Penguin Press, 2010) explores what he sees as the very positive possible impacts of global sharing of knowledge. Taking the opposing point of view, Nicholas Carr decries the negative implications in his book *"What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains: The Shallows,"*(New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

[v] For example, see US Joint Chiefs of Staff handbook, *"Planner's Handbook for Operational Design"*, Version 1.0, (Suffolk, Virginia, 7 October 2011), 2

[vi] The OODA loop as this became know was first expounded by Colonel John Boyd, U.S. Air Force in the 1960's and was later incorporated either directly or conceptually in much of U.S. military strategy and planning doctrine. While those later efforts often portrayed the OODA loop as a simple four part circle, in fact, Boyd's concept was a much more dynamic system of thinking that included multiple feedback loops in his explanations. See Robert Coram, *"Boyd: the Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War"*, (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 334-335

[vii] Sue Camp and Marilyn Satterwhite, *"College English and Communication"*, (Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2006). Some writers add "to entertain" as a valid purpose for communicating but, since it is doubtful that strategists see their product as entertainment, we will ignore that addition.

[viii] This tension can be expressed by two famous quotes: "All war is deception" by Sun Tsu and "Do I not destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?" by Abraham Lincoln.

[ix] Shawn Callahan, "Will your strategy stick?", http://www.anecdote.com/whitepapers/?wpname=Sticky_strategy, accessed 27 January 2015